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The Lab Report, volume 05, issue 07

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Playwright's Lab
at Hollins University

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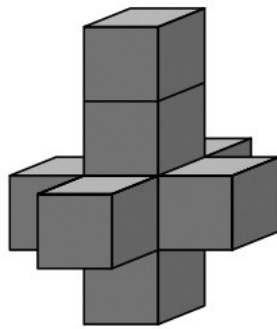


The Lab Report

Playwriting News from the Playwright's Lab at Hollins University

Volume 05, Issue 07 (December, 2011)

Tesseract Theatre Calls for Submissions



Tesseract Theatre Company is based in St. Louis, Missouri and was founded by MFA playwright Taylor Gruenloh, who serves as the company's Artistic Director. Their mission is to emphasize the diversity and significance of multiracial casting in the regional theatre spectrum of the Midwest, and in furthering that mission they are beginning to incorporate an emphasis on new play development.

"We are a new theatre company that will provide playwrights in the St. Louis area the chance to have their

work be part of a series of dramatic readings, possible leading to a full production slot in an upcoming season," Taylor said.

Though the focus is on supporting the local theatre community, after his first summer at Hollins Taylor has opened up the call for submissions to his fellow playwrights in the program.

Gruenloh explains, "We're putting together our 2012-2013 schedule, getting it ready for grant panels. It turns out our schedule has some big holes in it and the space we rent has some open availability at the same time. So, I'm extending the invitation to the Playwright's Lab playwrights submit work. This isn't for readings, this is for actual productions. We are a small house and can run a play for about two weeks."

Tesseract pays writers a flat

royalty of \$400 rather than a percentage of admission because they don't charge audiences to see the plays. Currently, donations to the company offset expense or are divided equally among the cast members.

"I'm very interested in producing work from Hollins," Gruenloh said. "In fact, we are already planning on producing Clinton Johnston's *Am I Black Enough Yet?* in March."

Johnston's play was featured in the 2011 Festival of Student Readings at Hollins, and received a standing ovation.

"Clinton's play was exactly what we're looking for, a diverse cast and a strong message about the absurdities involved in racial politics in America," Taylor told us.

For full details on how to submit to Tesseract, please visit their website.

tesseracttheatre.org

Student Spotlight: Taylor Gruenloh

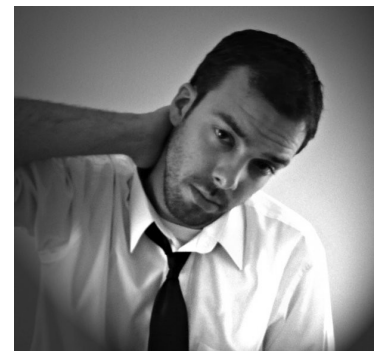
Taylor Gruenloh is the artistic director at Tesseract Theatre Company. His play *Loves' Fine Wit* was a 2009 regional winner in the League for Innovation Literary Contest and has been published.

2011 was Taylor's first summer in the program and he was selected to participate in Overnight Sensations, produced at Mill Mountain Theatre. In just under 12 hours he wrote his 10-minute play *Ain't Nobody's Bargain*.

"Overnight Sensations was a trip, because it is the whole process of putting up a play overnight," said Gruenloh. "The director having a problem

with the script, actors having problems with certain lines, and it all just organically got fixed. It was a really cool process and everyone was collaborative."

Asked why he chose Hollins, Taylor explained, "Playwriting is the kind of storytelling I want to do. I have a background in acting and I wanted to learn the art of telling a story on stage. The program here is a fun way to really immerse yourself in your studies. The outside world is almost shut off during this six weeks and theatre just overtakes you. Especially with all the guest artists that they bring in during



the session. In six weeks you go from knowing nobody to knowing almost everybody. Seeing all these plays, hearing all these readings, the diversity of voices is probably the best thing about it."

Taylor is already emerging as a leader in the community and we're looking forward his return.

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Guest Profile: Gina Kaufmann

Gina Kaufmann has worked as a director and acting coach in numerous regional venues, including The Williamstown Theatre Festival, Shakespeare & Company, and Buddies in Bad Times Theatre in Toronto. In New York, she has directed for SoHo Rep, HOME for Contemporary Theatre and Art, Wings Theatre, and Dixon Place.

Most recently, Kaufmann directed *1905*, a collaboration with The Misa Table Dance Theatre Collective, *Tartuffe* and *Private Lives* for Sacramento Theatre Company and *The Comedy of Errors* for Lake Tahoe Shakespeare Festival.

Gina has worked extensively on new play development, including three years as a guest director with Paula Vogel and the New Play Festival at Brown University, directing a production of Vogel's own play, *Hot 'N' Throbbing* at Wellfleet Harbor Actors' Theatre, and four years as the Founding Artistic Director of The Unusual Cabaret, where she produced and directed new work by Jeff Goode (*Narcissus and Echo*) and Mark Hollman (*Urinetown: The Musical*).

Gina Kaufmann holds an MFA in Directing from The University of Texas at Austin and did her undergraduate work at the

University of Iowa where was immersed in a culture of new play development getting her early experience as both an actor and director. Kaufmann currently is co-director of the graduate program in directing at UMass Amherst, where she also teaches acting and directing at the undergraduate level. Gina also works regularly with Shakespeare & Company and is a member of The Society of Stage Directors and Choreographers.

We are thrilled Gina accepted our invitation to attend our 2011 Festival of Student Readings as a guest responder. The students found her charming and easy to engage, full of perceptive feedback on their work and generous advice on how to make their time at Hollins work to their best advantage.

We were able to pull her aside during her visit and ask her a few questions about her time at Hollins and this is what she had to tell us.

What did you know about Hollins before you arrived?

Before I came here, Todd had talked to me about the program and trying to create an MFA in playwriting program that works

with a whole different community of students than a traditional 3-year type of program that goes full time except for summers. In a way it's the opposite and it works with people who already have some kind of career going whether it is in theatre or otherwise.

How are you feeling about the feedback sessions after the readings in Festival?

I think, mostly, it's worked out really well. There are times when I think we, are just kind of putting our thoughts together because there's a lot to process to get the conversation going. I've actually been impressed we've been able to have really fruitful feedback that feels like a real conversation. In the time we have allotted, that's impressive. I feel like everyone—the playwrights, the guests, the audience—all seem to respect the work and they give their feedback in order to support and be truthful. Support doesn't have to mean you love it. It can mean saying, "I want you to see what my experience is. I want you to understand what my experience is." I think that is really important too, that support can take many forms. I've appreciated the perspectives that people have. They are often commenting on each other, sometimes at odds with each other and there seems to be a strong comfort level with being at odds with each other. I think that's actually really important, because no two people experience a piece in the same way.

As a director, what advice do you have for the early career playwright?

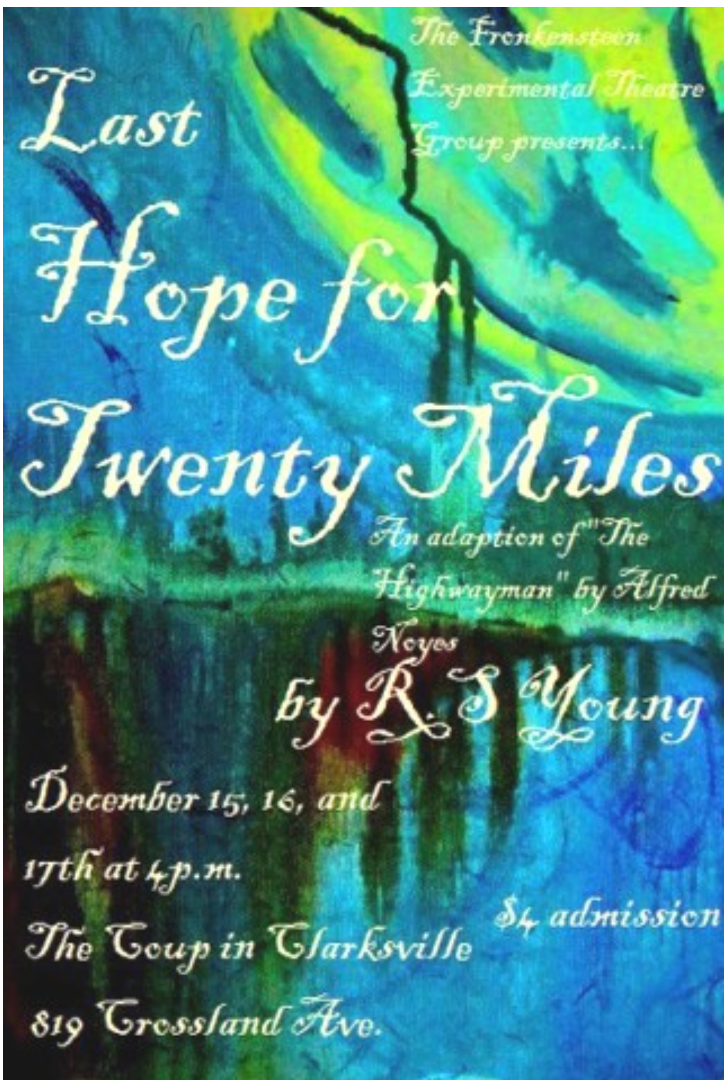
Let me just say, in terms of allowing someone to read a



script in a way that makes a director feel like working on the play is going to be a collaboration that they can get into. I've seen, at times, with these readings that the stage directions, in various ways, get in the playwright's way. It feels like the stage directions are trying to direct, or control. So, the director may feel like you're not, as the playwright, seeing the play as actual work for the theatre. If the stage directions help and support the storytelling, great. But, if they are telling you how a character feels, how you should make a certain effect happen—trust that if you say you want the sun rising or the petals falling, or whatever it may be that the director and designers will collaborate to figure out why that's there and how to make that happen. As opposed to you needing to control the how of that. It helps the director want to direct something. You're not clutching it close, you're saying, "Here's my work, here's my heart." And, they're going to take it, and (hopefully) respect what you've given it but they've got their vision. They've got their vision, there's a reason that they are working on this too—the actors, and director and designers.



Last Hope for Twenty Miles by RS Young



Ricky Steven Young is the founder and Artistic Director of Fronkensteen Experimental Theatre Group, a theatre company based in Clarksville, TN that specializes in the development and production of new plays.

Young, who started his graduate work with the Playwright's Lab last summer, penned the play that will bring to a close the last show of Fronkensteen's inaugural season. The play is titled *Last Hope for Twenty Miles* is a play based on Alfred Noyes' *The Highwayman*, an early American romantic poem.

The play follows Virginia, the

protagonist, who is desperate to escape the harsh surroundings of the old roadside hotel and bar she has inherited from her father. She is so desperate to find an escape and obtain the fairy tale ending she craves that she is willing to try anything—even if that means casting a slightly crazy and obviously dangerous roadside crook in the role of her knight in shining armor.

Steven describes the play as “a redneck melodrama.”

Director Sara Schichtel, who also acts in the show, describes this play as an excellent capstone to the season.

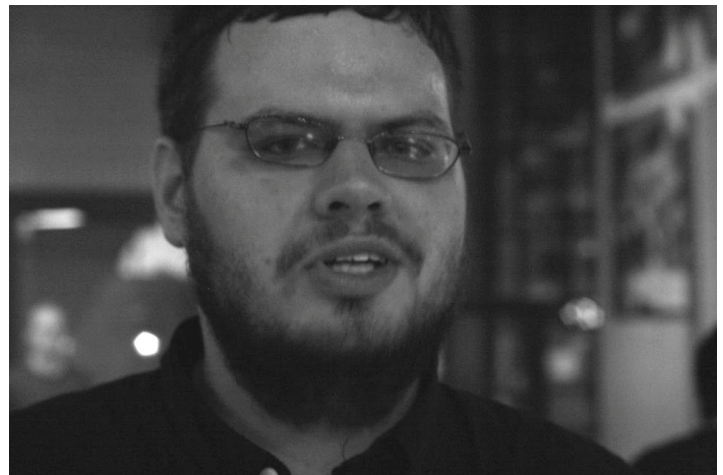
She said in an interview, “We have had so many stops and starts, gotten so many bumps and bruises along the way that this performance is almost a celebration that we have made it through this year.”

Ricky Steven is looking to blend the community of playwrights he's not a part of at Hollins with his local theatre community by producing plays he discovers while at Hollins during the summer.

Fronkensteen announced its

next season at performances of his show. The productions will include three short plays by Hollins playwright Jeri Weiss and Samantha Macher's robot play *RESET*.

“I'm really excited about the plays that we received and about the fresh faces that we get to work with,” says Young, “Partnering with the Playwright's Lab will connect our local playwrights with the national theater world and bring exciting new voices to the Clarksville Stage.”



fronkensteentheater.squarespace.com



Samantha Macher had an early draft of her new play, *War Bride*, read at SkyPilot this month as part of the monthly reading series she curates. The play was showcased with *Fursona Non Grata*, by Jeff Goode, on the same evening.

Both of the plays were very early drafts and the hearing of the plays by actors, with the encouraging feedback were important to the writers as they continue to revise the plays.

Those revisions will be important, as a week after the reading season selection was announced and both plays were set for production by the company as main stage shows. *War Bride* will premiere in August of 2012 and *Fursona Non Grata* will have a slot in 2013. Each will likely have at least one more developmental reading prior to its opening.

skypilottheatre.com

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No Shame Central Coast Celebrates First Anniversary



No Shame Theatre was originally created by Todd Ristau, Stan Ruth and Jeff Goode at the University of Iowa in 1986. Ristau invited local writers and performers to bring their short theatre pieces to the parking lot of the Theatre Department and to perform them in the back of his pickup truck as an improvised stage. Crowds huddled against the cold, cheered what they liked and sometimes threw bottles at what they hated, but the magic of this anything goes venue stuck. 25 years later, No Shame is not only still at the University of Iowa, but franchise locations have sprouted up in New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, Roanoke, St. Louis and lots of other cities around the country.

The No Shame chapter hosted at the San Luis Obispo Little Theatre (SLOLT) celebrated its one year anniversary on December 16, 2011, and was spearheaded by our own MFA playwright Wendy-Marie Foerster who is the Development Director for the theatre. No Shame at SLOLT has happened every 4th Friday for the past year.

The launch of No Shame at SLOLT was met with nearly universal enthusiasm and the first night garnered a very positive review. Unfortunately, the quirky venue finding a new home didn't sit well with everyone and controversy erupted when a few conservative voices in the community (who had not actually attended the opening No Shame) began a letter writing

Every 4th Friday at 11:30 PM



campaign to the local newspaper in an effort to shut No Shame down, asking "What's happened to the Theatre?"

One of the letter writers opined, "...this stuff belongs at some late night comedy club where you can be as crass and offensive as you desire. But not on public property in our community theatre."

Oh, it is so hard to stamp out something inherently subversive by telling the people doing it that it is wrong.

These vocal guardians of proper culture had no chance against the enthusiasm of Central Coast theatre lovers, who continue to fill the 99-seat black box theatre to the maximum capacity every month.

In her own letter Foerster asked, "Exactly what stuff are you referring to? Certainly you are not talking about the outstanding performances by some of the best actors on the Central Coast? Perhaps you were speaking of the theatre pieces, which explored not only the human condition but love and family relationships as well?"

She went on to point out that the most unfair review of all comes from a critic who doesn't attend the performance they are critiquing and that in its long history No Shame in more than 40 locations over 25 years have

been a proving ground for early work by such noted playwrights as Rebecca Gilman, Naomi Wallace, and Jeff Goode.

Goode himself, and MFA playwright Samantha Macher were on hand to celebrate the first anniversary of this scrappy vehicle for scrappier artists in San Luis Obispo as guests of honor. There were lots of performances, a huge cake and a video retrospective of all the venue's pieces from their first year.

Co-producers of the Central Coast No Shame—Hollins Playwright's Lab student, Wendy-Marie Foerster, SLOLT Managing Artistic Director, Kevin Harris, and professional director, Katie Mack-Montenegro—were thrilled to have Jeff and Sam

perform their own monologues for the standing room only crowd.

"There wasn't an in your face attitude or an I told you so kind of vibe," Macher said. "They were just really proud of it. Wendy-Marie and the people that contribute take a lot of pride in their No Shame. It was really cool, they had champagne, and there were speeches. There was a real sense of community accomplishment. It was great to see how valuable No Shame is to that community and how much people really love it"

Foerster summed it up by saying, "No Shame has become an important part of the San Luis Obispo Little Theatre and we look forward to another fantastic year."



slolittletheatre.org/pages/miscellaneous/noshame

Fast & Loose #40 Includes Hollins Playwright



Fast & Loose is Sacred Fools' take on the 24-hour play concept. The Los Angeles based theatre has been hosting the event since 1998—40 times in 13 years.

Similar to our own *Overnight Sensations*, six writers select writing prompts the night before the performance, usually on a theme. For the Dec 31st show all the prompts had to do with **A)** How the World Might End **B)** A Type of Baby Animal and **C)** a sound effect. These prompts serve as the writer's inspiration for the short play they must complete in the 12 hours before rehearsals begin in the morning.

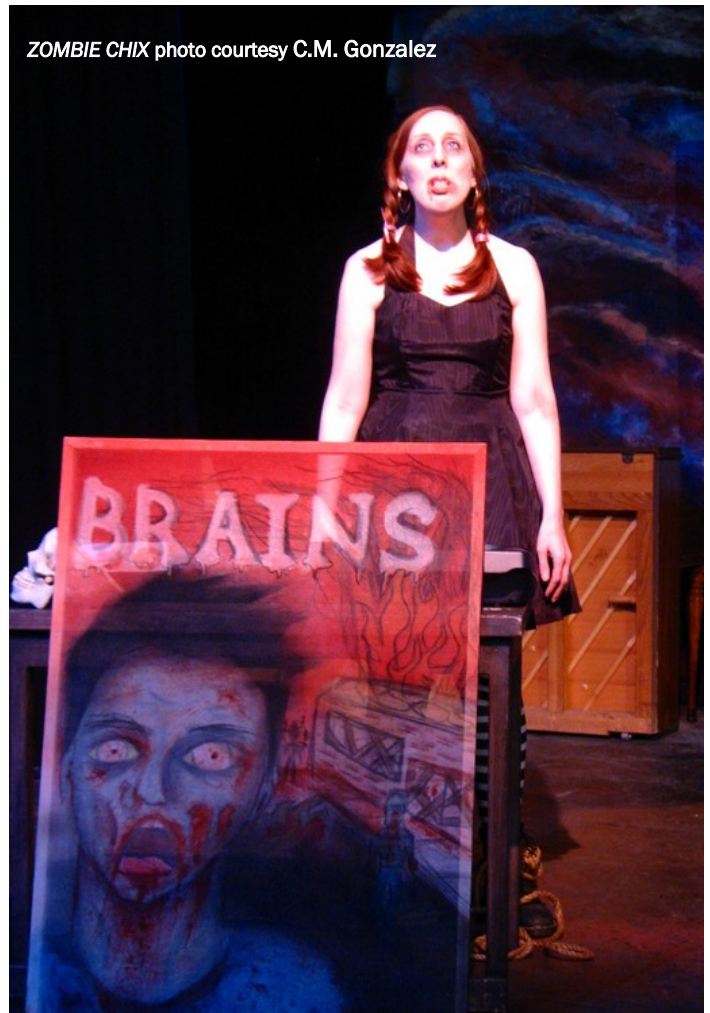
MFA playwright Samantha Macher participated again this year, and for her prompts drew "Zombies", "Chick" and a weird sort of electronic feedback hum. The resulting play was *ZOMBIE CHIX*, about a post apocalyptic girl group. It is worth noting that Sam was in Virginia when the prompts were

drawn and the sound cue had to be emailed to her. Sam wrote all night and emailed the script back before she got on the plane in the morning. She arrived in LAX and went straight to the theatre, arriving half way through the first act and just in time to watch her show from the light booth!

C.M. Gonzalez, who has been with Sacred Fools as a technician since 2002 and is their current propmaster also wrote for the show.

Gonzalez told us, "I can tell you that these shows can be a challenge for the directors, in that they have to work with scripts that have just been finished sometimes moments before they get them. Their casts are picked out of a hat. As challenging as it can be for an actor to work with dialogue like this, it's also a massive challenge for the director who has to coordinate what they've just been given. In the end, the energy seen onstage from the rush to put together a good show in 24 hours can be really thrilling, not just for the production crew, but for the audience as well."

ZOMBIE CHIX photo courtesy C.M. Gonzalez



www.sacredfools.org/misc/fastandloose/archives/fl40.htm

Mary's Dream by Yulia Gray at University of Akron



Yulia Gray is an MFA playwright at Hollins whose focus has always been deeply rooted in religious considerations and issues related to health, in particular women's health.

She holds degrees in biology, art, art history and medicine with training in dermatology. She also has training from the Ohio College of Clowning Arts where she has also taught clowning and served on the board of directors.

Last October, Gray worked with Caorl Eutsey to present her breast cancer play, *I Need More*

Time, Thanks! The play was produced by Truth Be Told Theatrical Company, founded by Eutsey.

The creative partnership continued this month with the mounting of two new one act plays through the Truth Be Told company at the Sandefur Theatre in Guzzetta Hall at the University of Akron.

Yulia's on-act play *Mary's Dream* was paired with *The Last Word*, a one-act written by Caorl Eutsey and were performed over the weekend of December 16th and 17th by members of Eutsey's

company.

The photo below is from *Mary's Dream*.



betold47.wordpress.com

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12 Plays of Christmas at SkyPilot Theatre Features Hollins Playwrights



SkyPilot Theatre in Los Angeles has become the artistic home to many West Coasts playwrights associated with our graduate program in playwriting. Jeff Goode, who has been a frequent guest artist and regular visiting faculty member is Senior Playwright-in-Residence there, helping to coordinate and promote the work of MFA playwrights like Nikki Adkins, Adam Hahn and Samantha Macher.

As a result, SkyPilot has shifted its mission to produce only new plays written by their resident playwrights and performed by members of the acting ensemble. They've had a string of recent successes, including *To The New Girl* by Sam Macher and plans for full productions of upcoming plays by Hollins writers.

Of course, producing plays in a major theatre city costs money, and that means always coming up with innovative ways to raise money.

"One day, Sam and I were standing on a street corner near Jeff Goode and Mike Rothschild.

We were discussing plans for SkyPilot's holiday fundraiser, and one of us—probably Sam—came up with the title, *12 Plays of Christmas*," Hahn recalls.

The title stuck, and they began to figure out what the show would look like: 12 short plays by 12 different writers, each having something to do with one of the 12 objects from the classic Christmas carol.

SkyPilot is the kind of company where a couple of motivated people with a good idea will find enough support to make it happen, and this idea fit the company's needs: every writer and actor who wanted to participate could have a significant role, and the show fit as the centerpiece of a holiday party.

"I thought one of the coolest things about it is that it demonstrates the non-rigidity of the way we develop work at SkyPilot," Goode elaborated. "We were excited about the idea, so I took it to Bob Rusch, the Artistic Director. He thought it was a cool idea, so he green lit it to replace a band that had dropped out of our December Rock n' Roll Fundraiser."

The project was given to Adam and Sam to coordinate.

"We just said to make it happen," Goode told us. "We trust you to get the job done."

Audiences enjoyed the show so much that SkyPilot now plans to make it an annual event and a possible publishing property somewhere down the line.

Hollins playwrights involved in creating this unique fundraiser included Adam Hahn, Samantha Macher, Nikki Adkins, Wendy-Marie Foerster and Sean Engard. The show also had participation from established playwrights who are associated with the program at Hollins, like

visiting faculty, Festival guest responders and guest speakers. These included Julianne Homokay, Jonathan Price, Dave Ulrich, Jeff Goode and Tira Palmquist.

"Each of the writers was given the freedom to riff on their objects from the song however they wanted, and we ended up with a few holiday pieces," Adam said in describing the process. "Jeff Goode's *Two Turtle Doves* gave us two men protesting the war on Christmas and some non-holiday fun like Liz Shannon Miller's *Five Golden Rings* where a middle-aged couple would do anything to become grandparents. Sam's *Eight Maids A' Milkin* staged a nurse-in."

Hahn's contribution was used as interstitials throughout the evening. *Twelve Stations of the Pear Tree* was provided series of brief dialogues between a young man trying to assemble all of the gifts from the song for his beloved and a partridge who refuses to get in the pear tree. Adam played the tree and Nikki Adkins played the partridge.

"As an evening of theatre, it worked like a high-energy night

of No Shame: actors jumped in and out of the audience as we presented a rapid-fire collection of scenes and music. The audience sang the Christmas carol one line at a time to introduce each scene," said Hahn.

"It was a lot of fun, and a cool challenge. It was clever and pretty exciting to do, I hope we do it again every year," Macher added. "We're an ensemble company and I think what it did really well was highlight the talents of the playwrights by writing for specific actors."

The dual theatre/music event began with the plays at 7PM and The bands at 8PM.

"I think the model is going to change next year. I think the plays are going to be the featured event of the fundraiser next year, so it would be *The 12 Plays of Christmas* and then a party after," Samantha said.

All proceeds from the event went to funding the 2012 season, including the Children's Outreach Program which provides theatre to children from disadvantaged backgrounds.



Adam Hahn and Nikki Adkins in *Twelve Stations of the Pear Tree*.

Consider a Year-End Gift to the New Works Initiative

Hollins University has always been known as one of the best places in the world to study creative writing. Since the launch of the Playwright's Lab in 2007, we've also rapidly become known as one of the best places in the world to study playwriting.

Our unique program at Hollins has been described by Bob Moss, founder of Playwrights Horizons, as "re-inventing Off-off Broadway" and building "a Provincetown Playhouse for a new generation."

Todd London, who is the Artistic Director of New Dramatists, described us as "a well designed and passionately run program."

The support and enthusiasm of well established and respected theatre professionals like these is incredibly important to us, but the real signifiers of what we're accomplishing here is the work of our students and the enthusiastic support of people like you in helping us get their new plays up on stage with scripts in the hands of real live actors performing in front of real live audiences.

Our MFA program has no funds in our budget for the production or presentation of student work, which is the single most important thing to an emerging playwright.

In order to facilitate productions and readings in Roanoke and in legitimate theatres who partner with us around the country, Hollins has created the New Works Initiative Fund. Every penny that goes into that fund is from ticket sales and charitable giving from people just like you.

The first year of the fund, we raised a little over \$4,000. We were thrilled with that success and put it all back into even more programming offered to local audiences with experiential

learning opportunities for more playwrights and even more local actors. That success earned us over \$6,000 last year!

This coming year we are getting ready to take our efforts, and the work of our student writers, to the next level.

One of our playwrights, Samantha Macher, had her play *The Arctic Circle* and a *Recipe for Swedish Pancakes* read at our Festival of Student Readings and got a publication offer after the reading—the only catch is that their policy is to only publish plays which have had at least six performances in a legitimate theatre.

We talked to Mill Mountain Theatre and they agreed to give us a week-long production slot on the Waldron Stage in February. We showed the play to Bob Moss, who was one of our visiting faculty members last summer, and he wanted to direct it. Not only that, but he helped us get an invitation to transfer the play to Manhattan's Playwright's Horizon Studios for a week of performances!

All of this is an incredible opportunity for our student playwright, an amazing endorsement of the program and a thrilling chance for the entire cast of local actors to go to New York City. Of course, after looking at the numbers, for this one show we will need to raise more than we took in for the entire previous year.

To cover the cost of the guest professional director, stipends for each of the actors, technical director and stage manager as well as costumes, set pieces and props—not to mention travel, housing and publicity—we will need to raise \$7800 before opening night on February 14th, 2012.

Samantha Macher's

The Arctic Circle*

Directed by Bob Moss

Produced in cooperation with Playwright's Lab at Hollins University

***and a recipe for Swedish pancakes**

February 14-18 Tuesday through Saturday
8PM (also 2PM on Saturday)
Waldron Stage at 20 Church Avenue
\$15 at the door, \$10 in advance

Advance sales via brownpapertickets.com
Produced in cooperation with Mill Mountain Theatre
as part of the Marginal Arts Festival
Call (540) 556-5396 for more information
or visit www.millmountain.org

Mill Mountain Theatre

We have already received contributions of more \$4000 than toward this production and there has been tremendous interest from local businesses in buying advertising space for the playbill.

As you consider your year end giving, please think about helping us to close in on our goal and raise the remaining \$4,800.

Your gift of **\$1000, \$500, \$100** or any amount you can afford will make a tremendous impact and ensure not only that Sam's play gets produced, published, and to New York City but also that our playwriting program will continue

to make people think of Roanoke, VA when they think of new play development.

You can make your gift with a credit card on-line by going to www.hollins.edu/giveonline. Follow the instructions and be sure to click on "other" so that you can designate your gift as being for the **New Works Initiative**. That last step is important to make certain your gift goes to the fund you intend.

Thank you again for your support, and we hope you'll come see the show you help us put on!

Playwright's Lab at Hollins University

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For application materials, please call (540) 362-6326 or visit on the web at www.hollins.edu/grad/playwriting for more information.

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From the Director: What's in Your Manifesto?

While working on the article about San Luis Obispo's No Shame standing up to folks who had not seen their work but were still perfectly willing to tell them that work didn't belong in their community theatre, I had visceral flashbacks all the way to 1986 when I started the first No Shame in the back of my truck.

That was a revolutionary act designed to meet the needs of a community who felt they had no platform from which to be seen or heard, who didn't want to conform to an artistic standard that felt like a command to self-censor instead of explore, and who needed a place where they could get up in front of an audience and commit more revolutionary acts (five minutes at a time) for two hours every

Friday night.

Back then, I was truly inspired by agitation propaganda and I had teachers who really encouraged seeing all art (and especially theatre) as subversive by design and powerful by nature.

Eric Forsythe, who taught the only directing class I ever took, made us read the manifestos of important theatres and theatre artists. Then, as an assignment, he told us to come back to class with our own manifestos. He told us he didn't care so much what we said, so long as we said it clearly, honestly, and with all the passion it deserved. Then he said he was going to base a big part of our grade on whether or not the work we did in his class was consistent with what we wrote down in our

manifestos.

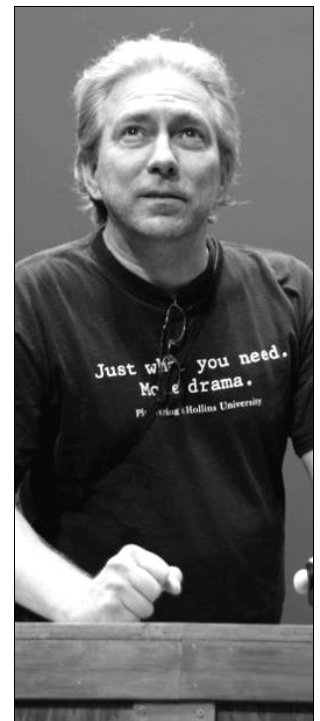
That has to be one of the most brilliant and important assignments I ever did when I was in college.

I still have that yellowed, stapled, three page document on perforated computer paper printed with a dot matrix printer.

I remember getting a smiley face when I turned it in, and I remember people asking me for copies of it when I read it at No Shame.

And to this day, I think I am still doing work that is consistent with that manifesto.

Here's the challenge: **Write your own.**



Todd Ristau, Director